

explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

Remembering the past, predicting the future: John Steinbeck's explorations of Cold War Russia in *A Russian Journal*

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DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.17.5.4

Abstract. *A Russian Journal*, published in 1948, is an unusual record of the great other side of Russia, wherein American Nobel Prize winner John Steinbeck and the distinguished photojournalist Robert Capa struggle to present the Soviet Union in cultural rather than political terms. The authors make a sweeping journey through the USSR, portraying the landscapes and ways of life of ordinary Russians who were emerging from the rubble of WWII with the hope of peaceful coexistence of capitalism and communism in the atomic decade. Reporting on the unknown, Steinbeck and Capa take up a delicate task of introducing simple and unexplored truths about America's wartime ally and its immediate postwar adversary. Consequently, *A Russian Journal* becomes a unique journalistic account of two countries trapped in the rigidities of the Cold War miscommunication patterns.

Key words: John Steinbeck, travel narrative, Russia, war, Cold War

1. INTRODUCTION¹

It is no doubt near obvious that John Steinbeck's reputation and his lasting fame rest primarily on his great novel of the American Depression, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). In the works that followed the author did not detach himself from current social and political issues yet a sharp qualitative decline evident by the end of World War II marks up his later fiction. In general view, none of his succeeding writings attain the overall impressiveness of the archetypal story of restless migrants moving west to begin anew. Steinbeck's reportorial and sociological approach, as used in the epic chronicle of the dispossessed Joads, is believed to have been a far less effective tool in the writer's inspection of international grounds. The harsh reality of WWII in Europe and Africa is depicted in *Once There Was a War* (1958), *The Moon Is Down* (1942) and *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team* (1942). The works in which economic factors were

¹ Short fragments of this text can be found in Hauzer (2013).

disregarded in favor of recreating social and political texture of the war years in Italy, England, Scandinavia, and northern Africa, all received rather modest critical reviews. Two years after the Second World War ended Steinbeck found himself midway; trying to please a group of soldiers who when they met the famous literati urged him to “write something funny that isn’t about the war. Write something for us to read – we’re sick of war” (Astro 1970, 109) and to remain faithful to his timeless predilection to social and political commentary. The result was *A Russian Journal* (AJR henceforth), published in 1948, a product of the uneasiness of the times. In a letter of July 10, 1947 – having learned of The New York Herald Tribune’s hire of John Steinbeck to visit the Soviet Union – the long-time publisher and friend, Pascal Covici, rejoiced: “[The trip] would bring you back to earth again, face to face with fundamental human values. There is a giant dormant in your soul and I want to see it stir with the compassion and generous understanding that is yours, yours above any other writer in America” (quoted in Fensch 1979, 59).

In 1947, when the Cold War began in earnest after Winston Churchill’s historic announcement at Fulton, Missouri that the Iron Curtain had been drawn across Eastern Europe, Steinbeck set out to explore the unexplored. *A Russian Journal* grew out of a necessity to escape the horrors of World War II and a willingness to translate the new conflict into human terms. The book presents Steinbeck’s all-time fascination with the individual and a clear instance of the correlations between the historical, economic, and the psychological. Accompanied by the acclaimed photojournalist Robert Capa, Steinbeck made a sweeping journey through the USSR portraying the landscapes and the modes of existence of people living under Soviet rule; their memories of war, everyday struggles and nuclear fears. Interested in the human dimension of the postwar Russia and determined to familiarize Americans with “the great other side” of the evil empire (ARJ 4), Steinbeck’s intention was to avoid judgmental statements or thoroughly political discussions. His efforts to take the measure of Soviet life situates the motivation of the author primarily in the cultural scene. The distinguished war photographer’s, Robert Capa’s, readiness for a new photographic challenge along with his relaxed, if not jocular, approach to political matters made him a perfect match for Steinbeck. This is what each of them had to say about their collaborative Cold War venture:

It will be necessary to say first how this story and how this trip started, and what its intention was [...]. In the papers every day there were thousands of words about Russia. What Stalin was thinking about, the plans of the Russian General Staff, the disposition of troops, experiments with atomic weapons and guided missiles, all of this by people who had not been there, and whose sources were not above reproach. And it occurred to us that there were some things that nobody wrote about Russia, and they were the things that interested us most of all. What do the people wear there? What do they serve at dinner? Do they have parties? What food is there? How do they make love, and how do they die? What do they talk about? Do they dance, and sing, and play? Do the children go to school? [...] There must be a private life of the Russian people, and that we could not read about because no one wrote about it, and no one photographed it [...]. And so we decided to try it—to do a simple reporting job backed up with photographs. We would work together. We would avoid politics and the larger issues. We would stay away from the Kremlin, from military men and from military plans. We wanted to get to the Russian people if we could. (ARJ 3-4)

[a]t the beginning of a newly invented war which was named the cold war...no one knew where the battlefields were. While I was figuring what to do I met Mr. Steinbeck, who had his own problems. He was struggling with a reluctant play, and the cold war gave him the same shivers it gave me. To make it short, we became a cold-war team. It seemed to us that behind phrases like “Iron Curtain,” “cold war” and “preventive war” people and thought and humor had fully disappeared. We decided to make an old-fashioned Don Quixote and Sancho Panza quest—to ride behind the “iron curtain” and pit our lances and pens against the windmills of today. (ARJ xvii)

The aim of this paper is to pursue Steinbeck’s understanding of the Soviet postwar trauma and the Soviet Cold War conduct. As fascinating as it is, *A Russian Journal* seems to have many unpardonable failures. The artistic parameters Steinbeck had set writing about only what he saw and with a great deal of emotion and enthrallment, making scarce comments on politics, conform to a rather blurred and incomplete picture of the Soviet individual consciousness the writer had so much wanted to discover. Steinbeck’s attempts at recapturing the Soviet weariness with WWII contribute to a remarkable account of ordinary people’s ulterior eagerness to live in peace in the times of a new escalating conflict: the Cold War. At the same time, the author’s intentional withdrawal from political implications makes the task of exploring the Soviet cultural self very difficult to accomplish. Why exactly is *A Russian Journal*, as Orville Prescott of The New York Times noticed, “better written than most [books about Communist Russia], but [...] more superficial than many” (ARJ, xx)?

2. NATURALISTIC AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Steinbeck’s enchantment with Russia’s panoramas comes alive in his respectful attention to the scenic beauty sorely damaged by warfare. The book moves at the pace of the trip itself operating on a system of multiple departures and comebacks to and from Moscow. Of the flat grainlands of the Ukraine and its Dnieper valley he speaks in a seemingly careless fashion yet not bereft of some crucial cultural comments. Aesthetic, economic, and historical undertones produce a seamless whole, a strongly suggestive landscape which suffered acutely from a colossal injustice and yet is, as Arthur Miller observed on his own sojourn in Russia, “ultimately beautiful, making other countries seem tame, superficial, irrelevant” (quoted in Ditsky 1982, 24):

The huge breadbasket of Europe, the coveted land for centuries, the endless fields lay below us, yellow with wheat and rye, some of it already harvested, and some of it being harvested. There was no hill, no eminence of any kind. The flat stretched away to a round unbroken horizon. And streams and rivers snaked and twisted across the plain.

Near the villages there were the zigzags of trenches, and the scoops of shell holes where the fighting had taken place. There were roofless houses, and the black patches of burned buildings. (ARJ 50)

Steinbeck's further explorations of the Russian interior provoke similar thoughts on the war's interdependence with nature. The writer's recollections from his stay at the farm village Shevchenko, named after a much beloved national poet, deftly underline the impact of the Soviet counteroffensive and the immensity of the war destruction. Steinbeck writes:

For a few miles our road was paved, and then we turned to the right and went along a dirt road, cut and torn to pieces. We went through pine forests and over a plain where vicious fighting had taken place. Everywhere there was evidence of it. The pine trees were ripped and ragged from machine-gun fire. There were trenches and machine-gun placements, and even the roads were cut and jagged by the tracks of tanks and pitted by shell fire. Here and there lay rusting bits of military equipment, burned-out tanks, and wrecked trucks. This country had been defended and lost, and the counterattack had fought slowly over every inch of territory. (ARJ 70).

In "American Past and Soviet Present" John F. Slater notes that in each of his travel writings, Steinbeck "performs certain amiable rituals to acclimate himself to the unaccustomed pressures he is about to encounter" (1975, 100). In *A Russian Journal*, to moderate the cultural shock and mitigate the general impression of Russia and America as bipolar opposites, Steinbeck replaces his usual contrastive manner with a new strategy which employs certain linguistic tools for a basis of comparison. The writer's intension to double the effect of cultural proximity by means of the simile rather than the metaphor produces a half-satisfactory outcome. The simile, as Slater points out, stresses separation as opposed to the metaphor which stresses union. What works with the writer's occasional literary annexations of the unpopulated landscape, does not work with the descriptive passages of Russia in numbers and its people.

Short comparative statements mediating among the great variety of Russia's *terra incognita*, compel the American reader to conceive and assume a greater appearance of commonality in an otherwise heavily internalized landscape. Steinbeck speaks of the flat grainlands of the Ukraine "as flat as our Middle West, and almost as fruitful" (ARJ 50). The tranquility of the Georgian seaside is recaptured in a comparative mode as well: "It might have been the coast of California, except that the Black Sea is not rocky. The sea is very blue, and very tranquil, and the beaches are very white" (ARJ 145). The land around Tiflis is composed of "little patches [in which] along the track the corn stood as high as it does in Kansas" (ARJ 170). The life on the Volga was "very rich" and reminded the travelers of "Mark Twain's account of the Mississippi of his day" (ARJ 124).

Telling of the men and scenes indigenous to war, Steinbeck and Capa suddenly become less accurate, if not biased or pretending unaware. As Peter Lisca suggests, the formal qualities of the prose when it is "deprived of pervasive naturalistic metaphor" (quoted in Marovitz 1974, 95) also depreciate. In one of the passages, in which accuracy is at stake, Steinbeck reports the figure of 6 million deaths whereas the Soviet government's estimates of the Ukrainian civilian loss, confirmed by U.N.R.R.A representatives, are up to 9 million (Timasheff 1948, 153). The statistical data is overlooked in favor of the language of moral support to the postwar effort and condemnation of the German invasion of Russia:

Much of the destruction that has been brought on this people is because their land is rich and productive and many conquerors have coveted it. If the United States were completely destroyed from New York to Kansas, we would have about the area of destruction the Ukraine has. If six million people were killed, not counting soldiers, fifteen percent of the population, you would have an idea of the casualties of the Ukraine. Counting soldiers, there would be many more, but six million out of forty-five million civilians have been killed. There are mines which will never be opened because the Germans threw thousands of bodies down into the shafts. Every piece of machinery in the Ukraine has been destroyed or removed, so that now, until more can be made, everything must be done by hand. Every stone and brick of the ruined city must be lifted and carried with the hands, for there are no bulldozers. And while they are rebuilding, the Ukrainians must produce food, for theirs is the great granary of the nation [...]. The work ahead of them is overwhelming.” (ARJ 56-8)

Another comment, intended to draw the American and Russian realities close, shows Steinbeck’s political naiveté. This passage is significant enough to be quoted here:

Since we have come back from Russia, probably the remark we have heard most is “I guess they put on a show for you; I guess they really fixed it up for you. They didn’t show you the real thing.” The people in this village [Shevchenko] did put on a show for us. They put on the same kind of show a Kansas farmer would put on for a guest. They did the same thing that our people do, so that Europeans say “The Americans live on chicken.” (ARJ 78)

Here, as in other instances, Steinbeck seems to be ignoring one important aspect of cultural life in the early post-WWII reality. One simply cannot contrast America’s situation with that of Stalin’s Russia under forcible collectivization. The rationale of democracy is freedom of expression whereas the totalitarian regime requires a different emphasis. Understandably enough, the Ukrainian farmers, who brought the U.S. visitors in, did “put on a show” (ARJ 78) before the agronomist and Mr. Poltoratsky, the government-appointed interpreter and Steinbeck’s inseparable companion. The arch-Stalinist Poltoratsky, who was “hated by all,” as Robert Capa’s biographer quotes after the dissident writer and Ukrainian activist Yuriy Sherekh, reported back to his superiors in an often unabashed manner, which brought him a popular nickname of “Poltovratsky” (from the Russian word “*vrat*” which means a liar) (Kershaw 2002, 188). Evidently, Steinbeck’s inclination to document the immensity of the war destruction coincided with Soviet propagandistic purposes. When the novelist shifts his perspective to commemorate an individual, to combine the truths of the inanimate and animate worlds, his hard-line party-member chaperons’ suspicion is galvanized and the author of *A Russian Journal* is relentlessly maneuvered into an incorrigible infatuation with the Soviet propagandistic theater in which the evils of the recent past dominate over the evils of the Communist present.

3. INTIMATE GLIMPSES OF COLD WAR RUSSIA

Just as Steinbeck's travel routes were carefully prearranged, the Soviets had a good reason to scrutinize Capa's powerful lenses. Whereas Steinbeck was allowed to take notes of a short tour in a dilapidated monastery which had been half-ruined by German shell fire as a result of the Nazi hasty retreat from Kiev, Capa's pictures of "a wild-eyed, half-crazed woman [...] crossing herself monotonously and mumbling" (ARJ 60) were intercepted by the Russian censors. In the book, Steinbeck's memorable descriptions of the atrocities of the Stalingrad existence in which the pair "grew more and more fascinated with the expanse of ruin" (ARJ 115) were to be presented pictorially. At the Moscow airport, on their return home, they both learned that the photographs of the half-starved young woman with a wild dog look, living underneath the rubble, were missing. To Steinbeck, the girl on her knees "had retired not to the hills, but into the ancient hills of the human past, into the old wilderness of pleasure, and pain, and self-preservation" (ARJ 118) and was "a face to dream about for a long time" (ARJ 118). To the Soviets, she was a clear antithesis of the great triumph of the war. The dreadful sight of the remnants of the city severely scarred after the most epic siege of WWII in which the Red Army victory over Field Marshall von Paulus, the commander of Hitler's Sixth Army, turned the tide decisively in favor of the allies in 1943, was to appease "the terror of the camera" (ARJ 122).

Capa's picture-taking was approached with fear and caution. He was believed to be following Steinbeck's instructions "to look for vulnerable [...] aspects of [Soviet] life" (Kershaw 2002, 187). The pictures which, in the opinion of the Deputy Chairman of UOKS, could not be considered favorably, were those of an emaciated woman-visitor to the Museum of Ukrainian Art and that of a kolkhoz family in their shabby attire. Neither of these images saw publication for they showed the reality of the postwar Soviet Union failing to recover from the military and civilian loss of more than 20 million people. Capa was also barred from documenting the factory where tractors were being forged from destroyed German Panzers. The photographer's excitement, his irritation with the Soviet obsession with secrecy and his professional jealousy contribute to a bitter comment: "Here, with two pictures, I could have shown more than many thousands of words could say" (ARJ 123).

Where Capa seeks and is occasionally prevented from documenting the severe austerity of a postwar wasteland: amusement parks with German tanks out for display, the rusting ruins of the weapons the Germans left behind, mass graves and the gloom of the city centers of Leningrad, Stalingrad and Kiev all of which witnessed calculated cruelties of the war, Steinbeck detects strong German presence in conversation. His deliverance is at times tendentious, limited by the interpreter's "truth" or misinterpreted. Again, Steinbeck's record is less controversial when he speaks without editorial comment, relating simple facts of the bygone, unendurable German presence. The text is larded with memories of war the abundance of which is used for psychological adequacy rather than literary ornamentation. The novelist's voice is tuned to the early postwar trauma when he speaks of the Germans "that had burned the Kiev circus" (ARJ 63), of a city corner where "the German sadists were hanged after the war" (ARJ 58), of a farm where the Germans destroyed all the fruit trees and had killed several hundred horned cattle (ARJ 71), etc. The sympathetically drawn portrait of the Russian experience extends from what the writer heard to what he saw. However, his political instincts desert him when he is exposed to a series of programmed inspections which often result in reports strikingly propagandistic in tone:

The town [Shevchenko] had lost fifty men of fighting age and fifty others, of all ages, and there were great numbers of crippled and maimed. Some of the children were legless and some had lost eyes. But the town, which needed labor so dreadfully, tried to give every man work to do that he could do. All the cripples who could work at all were put to work, and it gave them a sense of importance and a place in the life of the farm, so that there were few neurotics among the hurt people. They were not sad people. They were full of laughter, and jokes, and songs. (ARJ 71-2)

Clearly, Steinbeck's acute sensitiveness to the new postwar order sometimes disregards the war as part of a still vaster Cold War configuration. Making no claim to a scholarly approach, the writer states at the beginning "we would avoid politics and the larger issues" (ARJ 4). Following this political abnegation, many Steinbeck scholars place the book in a more inclusive, social rather than sociopolitical scene. Undoubtedly, the scope of the travel narrative leaves much unsaid and perhaps it is because of this intentional rejection of a wider perspective (partly imposed by circumstances) that the journal remains "of limited value" (Simpson 1972, 54). On the other hand, to modern-day readers, what Steinbeck does *not* say may, paradoxically, lead to a much better understanding of an unprecedented build-up in Russian-American tensions in the times of "neither war nor peace." One may speculate whether Steinbeck's framed portrait of the nation in its peacetime pursuits, vocational and vacational, exempt from delicate political issues, was a propagandistic attempt, diplomatic finesse, or product of ostensibly humanistic yet blindfolded approach to "communism's effect on the average man" (ARJ xxiii).

Occasional distortions in the reports from behind the Iron Curtain have a serious impact on the comprehensibility of the Soviet mindset Steinbeck and Capa had promised to disclose for the American reader. Specifically, in his literary explorations Steinbeck speaks of the Soviet Union without proper ethnic prudence. As John Ditsky (1982) points out, the writer carelessly uses "Russia" as a term for the Soviet peoples collectively, unwilling to acknowledge unceasing nationalistic conflicts. During Steinbeck's and Capa's visit, not long after the expulsion of German forces, the nation's constituent republics were engulfed in civil warfare. The most vigorous fighting against the Soviet regime did not end until 1950 of which Sherekh writes in his powerful critique of Steinbeck's silence:

Just as you did not notice the utter weariness and despair of the Soviet man, so you did not notice the national repression in the USSR. You did not see the struggle of the Ukrainian and the Georgian nations for their liberation. You did not find out that even the Soviet press in Ukraine is full of articles against 'Ukrainian nationalism' [...]. There is a war within the boundaries of the USSR, a secret and masked war, a war not for life, but unto death. You did not notice it however, although it can be clearly seen (quoted in Kershaw 2002, 187-8).

Similarly, behind the words of plenty in Steinbeck's descriptions of local feasts a dark truth is hidden. The U.S. visitors' exhaustion from overeating and drinking on what Professor Wolodymyr Stojko referred to as their "vodka tour" contrasts with the excess

of deaths owing to malnutrition and sickness resultant from the 1946 famine that had killed millions of rural Russians as well as from severe rationing inflicted upon the post-WWII Soviet society. Steinbeck's text makes no mention of these abnormally high mortality rates owing to the food shortage which lasted up to the harvest of 1947. The writer's one-sided impressions of the cityscape on his second visit to Moscow are commented on by Jay Parini when he writes: "Now, with many new buildings on view, the streets clean, and the Russian people well-fed, he encountered an atmosphere of progress. He seems to have been strangely unaware of Stalin's atrocities, which had been widely rumored if not documented by western journalists" (Parini 1994, 378).

Whether intentional or accidental, concealments serve their purpose making room for intimate evaluation of the Soviet hopes for the future. Implicit to ordinary Russians' notions of hope is reconstruction and peace. In his notes, Steinbeck recaptures this tragic posture of people who suffered unimaginable loss and now demonstrate a collective will of the nation to restore its old-time glamor. As evidenced in *A Russian Journal*, the Russians "like lavishness" (ARJ 59) and "with a slow, antlike energy will build cities of the future" (ARJ 59).

The temper of the times is best revealed, perhaps, in casual conversations in which, among endless WWII reminiscence, such words as "peace," "atom bomb," and "preventive war" appear. Here, conversely to Steinbeck's objective, an obtrusive political theme is treated with reportorial curiosity and allegiance. Just as the two superpowers wrestle with the prospects of an open conflict, in the Russian travelogue there are two Steinbecks groping with cultural understanding and ideological admonishment. The toasts raised to "peace, always to peace" (ARJ 65) and to "the abolishment of curtains of all kinds" (ARJ 181) incited questions whose relevance clearly pertained to the imminence of the Cold War. The indisputable presence of the new-emerging fears can be clearly seen in Steinbeck's depiction of the otherwise neglected aspects of the global political unrest. The visiting American journalist observes:

[Our hosts] spoke anxiously about war, they have had so much of it. They asked, "Will the United States attack us? Will we have to defend our country again in one lifetime?"

We said, "No, we do not think the United States will attack." [...] And we asked them where they got the idea that we might attack Russia.

Well, they said, they got it from our newspapers. Certain of our newspapers speak constantly of attacking Russia. And some of them speak of what they call preventive war. And, they said, that as far as they are concerned, preventive war is just like any other war. (ARJ 54-5)

Witness to psychological warfare, Steinbeck's reaction attains a greater than usual degree of impatience with what he euphemistically calls "misinformation about America" (ARJ 56):

If a war should break out between Russia and the United States, these people would believe that we are the villains. Whether it is through propaganda, or fear, or for whatever reason, they would blame us if there is a war. They speak only in terms of invasion of their country, and they are afraid of it, because they have had it. Again and again they ask, "Will the United States invade us? Will you send your bombers

to destroy us more?” And never do they say, “We will send our bombers,” or “We will invade.” (ARJ 56)

In *A Russian Journal* many cultural encounters offer hidden meanings, discovered by the visiting Americans only in the later stages of their travels. Their indomitable will to explore the world beyond their initial comprehension shows particularly well in a Moscow scene in which surveillance, when finally noticed, is approached with less irritation and more playfulness and humor. In the introductory notes to Steinbeck's journal Susan Shillinglaw draws the reader's attention to one of the most emblematic moments of the early Cold War climate of mutual distrust, codified in chapter three:

Three huge double windows overlooked the street. As time went on, Capa posted himself in the windows more and more, photographing little incidents that happened under our windows. Across the street, on the second floor, there was a man who ran a kind of camera repair shop. He worked long hours on equipment. And we discovered late in the game that while we were photographing him, he was photographing us. (ARJ 21)

4. CONCLUSIONS

Strikingly, both Steinbeck and Capa approach their task of showing “the great other side” of America's wartime ally and its immediate postwar antagonist with a great dose of naivety, lightheartedness and simplicity. Capa's jovial dismissal of early Cold War political disputes shows in a live interview with WNBC Radio in New York where he showed up to promote *A Russian Journal* just a few weeks after their return from Russia. Reporting on what it was like working with a camera on the other side of the Iron Curtain, he said, “To me iron curtain is a kind of pocket iron curtain. Everybody's carrying it in his own head. The other Iron Curtain, I don't know. It does exist a little bit, maybe, as borders are concerned. But I didn't have much trouble” (quoted in Kershaw 2002, 194). Similarly, Steinbeck's conclusive remarks on ordinary Russians (“The ones we met had a hatred of war, they wanted the same things all people want – good lives, increased comfort, security, and peace” (ARJ 212)) as well as the regime (“They had removed films that showed too much topography [...], and the pictures which showed prisoners, but nothing that mattered from our point of view was withheld” (ARJ 212)) seem to conform to Mr. Poltoratsky's prediction: “Steinbeck will rate the Soviet people favorably and will emphasize its sympathy to the American people. He will describe to some extent the ruin and will positively evaluate the heroic working of the Soviet Ukrainian people” (Kershaw 2002, 194).

What was meant as an attempt to “see how those people lived” to many critics turned out slightly disappointing and only partially true. Steinbeck's intention to present the Soviet Union without ideological context as well as his insistence on demarcating culture with politics both failed. Reporting on the “private life of the Russian people” in 1947 in Stalin's Russia was in itself a political act. Seeing how the Soviets endured and emerged from the rubble of World War II into the hopes of peaceful coexistence of capitalism and Communism on the verge of the atomic psychosis made *A Russian Journal* a resourceful and intriguing travel narrative. The politically delicate task of exploring a country trapped

in the rigidities of the Communist doctrine certainly contributes to a remarkable document. Yet, the power of observation is in Steinbeck's insights into Russia's cultural landscapes and its memories of war, not in its Cold War state of mind.

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